DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 745 RC 021 895

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TITLE The Roles of Paraeducators in a Rural-Remote State: Views of Administrators, Teachers, and Paras.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Rural Special Education for the New Millennium. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (19th, Albuquerque, New Mexico, March 25-27, 1999); see RC 021 888.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Attainment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Job Training; *Paraprofessional School Personnel; Rural Schools; Satisfaction; *Special Education; *Staff Role; State Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Training Needs

ABSTRACT

The state education agency in a northern rural state funded a study that investigated paraeducator training and roles in special education. Surveys were completed by 153 principals, 297 general education teachers, 554 special educators, and 572 paraeducators. Study results include data on the role of paraeducators, their educational background, and their training. Findings include the following: (1) paraeducators served primarily students with mild disabilities; (2) while 28 percent of paraprofessionals provided services in self-contained classrooms, most services were offered in general education environments; (3) some problems of role confusion were noted; (4) paraeducators served a mean of 12.8 students, but about 10 percent served only 1 student; (5) about one fifth of paraeducators were in their first year of employment; (6) paraeducators tended to be well educated, with a third having 4-year degrees or better; and (7) paraprofessionals tended to be satisfied with state-mandated training. (CDS)

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ED 429 745

THE ROLES OF PARAEDUCATORS IN A RURAL-REMOTE STATE: VIEWS OF ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND PARAS

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, paraprofessional status in 1999 represents the best of jobs and the worst of jobs. The influx of students with disabilities into general education classes has led to the situation where ever more direct services are delivered by paras--and these services are delivered to ever-more needy students. This may be particularly true in rural and remote sites where many licensed teachers remain itinerant (Murphy, 1994).

Very little is objectively known about the lot of special education paraprofessionals (Blalock, 1991; Milner, 1998). Those with concerns about the nature of services delivered to students with disabilities legitimately pose the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the roles of paraprofessionals?
2. How much (and what type of) education do paraeducators bring to their positions?
3. How much training is received by paras and how do they perceive the effectiveness of these efforts?

The research questions listed above guided the development of a study designed to investigated the roles of paraeducators in a rural remote state.

Method

The state education agency in a Northern-tier, rural state funded a study of paraeducators' roles and training. Building principals (N = 153, 53% response rate), special educators (N = 554, 57% return rate), general educators (N = 297), and special education paraeducators (N = 572, 57% response rate) served as respondents. Survey methods were employed, followed by calculation of descriptive statistics and, in some cases, inferential tests. Written responses were examined for emergent themes.

Two surveys were developed; a form was designed targeting principals, general education teachers, and special educators. A second form was developed for paraeducators. Items addressed perceptions of paras' roles, the nature of students with whom they experienced contact, settings for services, the nature of supervision, the availability of job descriptions, and training issues.

A letter addressed to each principal in the state included an administrator form and 10 copies of the general educator instrument; the administrator packet also included the quantity of surveys commensurate with the most recently-reported number of special education paraprofessionals in the building. Principals were requested to complete the administrator survey, distribute the general educator and paraeducator versions, collect completed surveys and place them in a postage-prepaid mailer. Surveys were returned to a university research bureau where they were tabulated and analyzed.

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Licensed special educators were surveyed via a direct mailer which included return postage. Lists of licensed special education teachers were obtained from the state education agency. All instruments were returned to a university research bureau where they were encoded and analyzed via SPSS for the Macintosh (SPSS, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The Role(s) of Paraeducators

A considerable degree of concordance regarding paras' roles was noted. For example, general education teachers, special education teachers, building administrators, and paras, themselves, portrayed paraeducators as serving primarily four groups. These were, in order, students with learning disabilities, speech-language disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbances.

Paras were more likely than were members of other groups to report themselves as working with students evidencing speech and language disorders. This probably means that some paras were confusing the categorical designation with deficited language behaviors evidenced by students.

Paras served in a variety of settings, led by general education classes (79.4%) and resource rooms (64.7%; the totals sum to over 100%, because respondents had observed paraprofessionals working in more than one setting per para). On average, paras were observed in a mean of nearly two settings each (M = 1.85, sd = 0.90). It is probably not possible, in other words, to focus training efforts on one disability--or even a few disabilities or settings.

Settings where special education paraeducators were seen as working are shown in Table 1. The significant chi squares indicate that paras' service "arenas" are perceived differently by members of the different respondent categories.

Table 1. Settings served by paras as a function of respondent group.

Respondent Category	Reg Class	Resrc Rm	Slf Cntnd	Comm-Based
Sp. Ed. Teachers	402 (72.6)	396 (71.5)	181 (32.7)	78 (14.1)
Administrators	138 (90.2)	133 (86.9)	63 (41.2)	32 (20.9)
General Ed. Tchrs.	256 (86.8)	119 (50.5)	39 (13.3)	79 (26.6)
Total	796 (79.4)	648 (64.7)	283 (28.3)	13 (4.4)
X^2	36.6	119.8	50.5	29.1
p	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Three aspects of paras' roles specifically addressed in the survey were **job descriptions**, **planning**, and **supervision**. It could be argued that effective deployment of paraprofessionals depends first upon the existence of a useful job description (upon which supervision and evaluation would presumably be based). Only 38% of paras reported possessing a written job description. Obviously, the great majority either knew they did not have one (26%) or did not know (37%).

Special education paraeducators were asked who wrote plans which guided their daily practice. Ten percent of paras either wrote their own daily plans (5%) or reported that they operated "without direction" (5%). Special education teachers were identified most often as the individuals planning for paraeducators.

It is estimated that 17% of paras receive clearly inadequate supervision. This figure is made up of 12% who responded "don't know" [to the supervision item] and 5% who "lacked supervision." Most paras (65%) indicated that special education teachers were providing feedback and guidance. This suggests that special education teacher trainees should receive specific training in planning for and supervising paraprofessionals. The quality of supervision and planning is unknown, though data from other studies suggest that it is often inadequate (e.g., Milner, 1998).

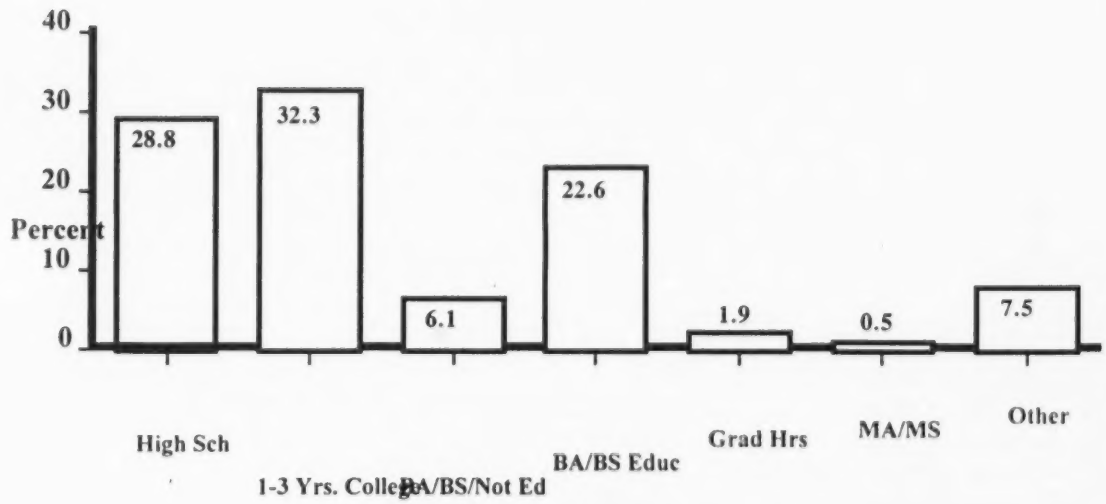
A lack of concordance between planning and supervision may be indicated. Fully 85% of paras report that special educators were primarily responsible for planning paras' days and weeks. On the other hand, evaluation and supervision was provided by special education teachers in only 65% of cases. It is difficult to imagine how special education directors or principals (the other groups supervising paraeducators) can provide adequate supervision or evaluation if no written job description exists or the special educator is responsible for planning.

Educational Background

As a group, paraeducators were quite experienced and evidenced considerable educational background. The mean years of employment at the time of the survey was 5.30 years (sd = 5.01); experience ranged from 0 to 30 years.

The mean number of students served by paras was 12.77. Twelve percent of the paraeducators served 1 student (or less; a few were performing clerical duties), while 22.2% served 2-5 students. The single most common category was 11 or more students, suggesting that paras are serving in resource and general education settings and seeing a number of students. This, in turn, suggests that training in scheduling and time management may be in order for special education paraeducators.

Figure 1. Paraprofessionals' self-reported educational attainment



Paraeducators' self-reported status regarding earned degrees is shown in Figure 1. Probably because universities in the state in question produce roughly twice as many elementary teachers as can be employed, a critical mass of well educated paras exists--even in rural parts of the state. Over a fifth of paras held degrees in education (22.6%). Nearly one in three (31.1%) had earned four-year degrees or higher.

The fact that many paras held degrees and that some degree of role confusion between paras and special educators is observed (Milner, 1998) produced some singular open-ended responses. Generally these fell into two categories. First, many teachers, administrators, and paras either thought that a degree was required or that a career ladder ought to be in place which reflected educational attainment. Second, worry was evidenced that paras were performing duties traditionally reserved for special educators and for which paras, it was felt, were not prepared:

- I think that the regular classroom teachers often expect more from paraeducators than what they should.
- ...they [paras] are doing many of the activities that the special education teachers used to do with students. My concern is for students, as to whether they are receiving the quality services that at one time were provided by the special education teacher.
- My concern is that we are hiring more aides to work directly with the students, who [the aides], in most cases, do not have the training needed to teach students appropriately.
- We use [the designation] "teacher aide" for employees without teacher credentials. We use the paraprofessional tag on those with certificates.
- We need to remember that the aides are paid a specific amount...Education has no bearing to what they get paid.

The majority of statements about the roles of paraprofessionals were positive comments regarding their importance in developing inclusionary programming. These comments outnumbered the "role confusion" statements about two to one.

Training

Between one-fifth and one-fourth of paras were in their first year of employment (22.7%). This "snapshot" of first year paras suggests that approximately this proportion represents yearly turnover. Because a significant relationship between hours of training and paraprofessional status was observed (X^2, 12, = 72.5, $p < .0001$), providing appropriate training to paraprofessionals appears a daunting task indeed. For example, fully half (50.7%) of new hires had not received any hours of training. Persons responsible for professional development in rural states will need to plan yearly on training a new cadre of **at least** 20% of the total number of paras from the previous year.

Training modules developed at a local university affiliated program were being delivered to paras across the state. Paras were offered the opportunity, via open-ended responses, to rate the quality, timeliness, and convenience of sessions.

Responses to training opportunities were generally favorable. About half of the written responses were seen as exclusively favorable (48.9% of all tabulated comments). Thirty-five percent of comments contained both positive and negative feedback (negative feedback coded if specific changes in

content or procedures were offered), while 13% of written comments were exclusively negative. About 3.1% of those responding provided comments which were uncodeable; these tended either to be statements about the job or neutral descriptions of training content.

Negative comments and suggestions for improvement or change were coded into four categories as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Categories of responses to open-ended questions.

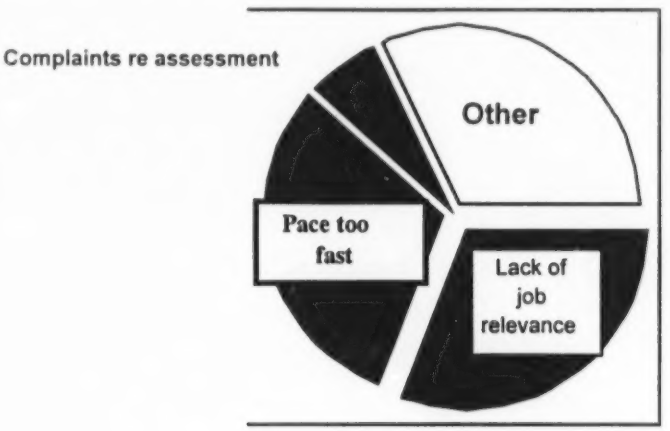


Figure 2 is based on 159 codeable responses, rather than on the number of respondents, because individuals offered varying numbers of statements. Approximately 1/3 of the responses indicated that the training on offer did not match the requirements of the position:

- I felt they [modules] were nothing at all pertaining to my work and were very outdated.
- Some aspects of the modules didn't apply to my job.

Many respondents argued that local districts and cooperative units could put together training sequences based on the specific needs of paras as they interacted with students.

About a third of negative responses proposed that the pace of instruction was too fast. Six percent argued that assessment practices were either (1) inadequate, or (2) not sufficiently tied to the material being taught. The "other" category included a variety of complaints and suggestions, for example, statements regarding the quality of presenters or materials, and disputation about logistics.

Summary

1. Paraeducators serve primarily students with mild disabilities. Paras reported themselves providing services to students with speech and language disabilities significantly more often than did other respondents. This might reflect confusion between language dysfunctions (evidenced by students served under other categories) and the categorical designation.

2. A significant number of paras were observed providing services in self contained classrooms (28.3%). A majority of services, on the other hand, were perceived as being offered in general education environments.

3. Some problems of role were noted. These include role confusion with special education teachers and a lack of written job descriptions. A small, but significant, minority received little or no supervision or assistance with daily or weekly planning.

4. Paras served a mean of 12.8 students. This figure is probably inflated by paras who serve in general education classrooms and who supervised lunch and playground activities. Just over 10% of paras served one student.

5. About a fifth of paraeducators were in their first year of employment. This is probably a reasonable estimate of the percentage of paras in rural- remote states and regions who will require initial training each year.

6. Paras tended to be a well educated group. One in five had earned education degrees and 1 in 3 possessed four-year degrees or better. The mean number of hours of training for paraeducators in the study was 12.1%, but over half of first-year hires had received no training at the time of the study (spring term).

7. Paras tended to be satisfied with state-mandated training, with 84% (of those offering comments) writing at least one positive observation and half writing only positive commentary. The pace of training was frequently criticized (too fast), as were assessment practices and relevance.

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